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Shortgrass Country

by Monte Noelke

The biggest concentrations of deer hunters appear to be on the passage called Highway 190, or Midway Lane. About five years go the Texas Highway Department installed new bridge signs naming every small draw or minute wash after the local designations. Herders ranching on Highway 190 south of the ranch lucked out with two bridges called "Big Buckhorn" and "Little Buckhorn," plus one more bellringer named "Devil's River Draw."

West of us, part of an old World War II bombing range named "the Target" kept the redcaps' pulse beats at a high rate. Right across the fence, my west pasture shows about as much appeal to the hunters as a town lot over in Mertzon does for a slick Dallas real estate developer.

I was already aware that we needed to dress up our act. On the way to Fort Worth, a small town Dairy Queen changed the plastic image of such franchises by hanging a huge buffalo bull's head on the small wall space between two restroom doors. Off hand, you'd think of a buffalo bull being a better drawing card for a Wild West saloon, or a hotel lobby than a hamburger joint.

Changing the name of a ranch in Texas requires a piece of 1x4 and a brush capable of lettering in any kind of paint

from lamp black to indoor enamel. The Double Half Circle label on our place of honors my step-dad, going back to when a Mr. Bell gave the brand to him in the '20s. For about four months out of the year I've been thinking about a new title like "The Cross Hair Ranch on Gun Powder Plateau," or perhaps, "The Black Antler of Big Musk Draw."

Hunters today are harder to fool than the first hunting lease prospectors. Such tricks as salting trails in horns from locker plants and knocking the bark off tree trunks to simulate rubs fails to satisfy parties requiring a documented game census by a certified wildlife biologist.

Throwing out introduced horns is not only dishonest, it's bad for business. Sure as new antlers are brought in, the spiny headed, dumb fuzzled porcupines will gnaw on your bait so bad that instead of encouraging the redcaps, so much sign makes hunters afraid to camp outdoors because they start thinking about the quills puncturing their air mattresses and causing their pickup tires to go flat.

Also, the Japanese market for horns knocks a rancher out of the best deals. I thought in the summer I might buy a few moose or caribou trophies in Alaska to hang on a highway gate; but at \$18 a pound, they were beyond my reach. Grizzly paws and black bear tails were under so many restrictions that I was afraid to touch them at any price.

The chances of renewing the program to rename the bridges on the highway are slim. However, running a porcupine census might reopen some old channels.